

## **Morphology**

### **Etymology of Morphology**

**Morph** = form or shape, **logy** = study of

Its etymology is Greek: *morph-* means ‘shape, form’, and *morphology* is the study of form or forms.

### **Definition of Morphology**

In biology morphology refers to the study of the form and structure of organisms, and in geology it refers to the study of the configuration and evolution of land forms. In linguistics morphology refers to the mental system involved in word formation or to the branch of linguistics that deals with words, their internal structure, and how they are formed.

## **Morpheme**

### **Definition of Morpheme**

A morpheme is a minimal unit of meaning or grammatical function. In the sentence, “*The police reopened the investigation,*” the word *reopened* consists of three morphemes. One minimal unit of meaning is *open*, another minimal unit of meaning is *re-* (meaning ‘again’) and a minimal unit of grammatical function is *-ed* (indicating past tense).

### **Exercise**

Divide each word in these sentences into morphemes. For each morpheme, determine whether it is a minimal unit of meaning or a grammatical function:

*How long have you been learning Italian?*

*The raindrops melded into a sheet of water.*

*She loves reading.*

## **Classification of morphemes**

Morphemes can be classified into two types: *free* and *bound* morphemes.

### **1. Free morphemes**

Free morphemes can stand by themselves as single words, for example, *open, tour, to* and *the*.

#### **Classification of free morphemes**

Free morphemes fall into two categories: *lexical and functional* morphemes.

##### **a. Lexical morphemes**

The first category is that set of ordinary *nouns, adjectives, and verbs* that we think of as the words that carry the ‘content’ of the messages we convey. Some examples are *girl, man, house, sad, long, green, open, follow*. We can add new lexical morphemes to the language rather easily, so they are treated as an open class of words.

##### **b. Functional morphemes**

Other types of free morphemes are called Functional morphemes. Examples are *and, but, when, on, near, that, it, them*. This set consists largely of the functional words in the language such as conjunctions, prepositions, articles, and pronouns. Because we almost never add new functional morphemes to the language, they are described as a ‘closed class of words’.

### **2. Bound morphemes**

Bound morphemes are those forms that cannot normally stand alone and are typically attached to another form, exemplified as *re-, -ist, -ed, -s*.

#### **Classification of bound morphemes**

Bound morphemes can be divided into two types: *derivational* and *inflectional* morphemes.

### a. Derivational morphemes

Derivational morphemes form new words either:

1. by changing the meaning of the base to which they are attached, e.g. *Kind* vs *unkind* (both are adjectives but with opposite meanings); *obey* vs *disobey* (both are verbs but with opposite meanings). Or
2. by changing the word-class that a base belongs to, e.g. the addition of *-ly* to the adjectives *kind* and *simple* produces the adverbs *kindly* and *simply*.

### b. Inflectional morphemes

The second set of bound morphemes contains what are called inflectional morphemes. These are not used to produce new words in the language, but rather to indicate aspects of the grammatical function of a word. Inflectional morphemes are used to show if a word is plural or singular, if it is past tense or not, and if it is a comparative or possessive form. English has only eight inflectional morphemes (or inflections):

N. + *- 's, -s*

V. + *-s, -ing, -ed, -en*

Adj. + *-est, -er*

### Exercise

- a. Identify the suffixes in the underlined words. To what word-class do the words to which the suffixes are added belong, and what word-class results?
- b. For each suffix determine whether it is inflectional or derivational. Briefly justify your decision.
  1. I peeled and sliced the potatoes.
  2. Cut the tomatoes into slices.
  3. The princelings are coming.

4. He ducks.
5. You are ducking the issue.
6. He is tireless.
7. He was sheepish.